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Viewing cable 09SANJOSE624, COSTA RICA'S FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT? SCENESETTER

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANJOSE624	2009-07-27 19:48	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-17/Investigacion/NotasSecundarias/Investigacion2712620.aspx>
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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN; WHA/PPC

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CS](#)
SUBJECT: COSTA RICA'S FIRST FEMALE PRESIDENT? SCENESETTER

Classified By: CDA Peter M. Brennan for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: With Costa Rica's presidential primary season now over, the stakes are set for the February 2010 national election. For the first time in Costa Rican history, a female candidate, Laura Chinchilla from the Partido Liberacion Nacional (PLN), has a strong chance to become President. Chinchilla, who was President Oscar Arias's vice-president before declaring her candidacy, handily won her party's hotly-contested June 7 primary election. The other two major-party candidates, Otton Solis from the Partido Accion Ciudadana (PAC) and former-President Rafael Angel Calderon from the Partido Union Social Cristiana (PUSC), are both political retreads who starkly contrast with Chinchilla's "fresher" public persona. In addition, Calderon has an ongoing legal case stemming from 2004 corruption charges. END SUMMARY

THE REAL GENERAL ELECTION? PLN'S PRIMARY

12. (SBU) In some ways, PLN's June 7 primary had all the appearances of a general election, from the large turnout of over half-a-million voters, to the fact that whomever emerged as the winner would be the favorite to win the 2010 presidential elections. Additionally, it was the only presidential primary that had an open, country-wide election in which all Costa Ricans could vote. While San Jose Mayor Johnny Araya, Chinchilla's chief adversary in the PLN primary, had led in the polls through March, Chinchilla had overtaken Araya by May 2009. Most of those polls gave a small advantage to Chinchilla going into the primary, though many experts still believed that Araya's well organized campaign might actually surge ahead for an election day victory.

13. (C) Araya's popularity sprang from his accomplishments as mayor of San Jose, not the least of which was his general managerial efficiency in Costa Rica's hectic capital (despite consistent rumors of corruption, which haunted him throughout the campaign). He also brought a subtle form of traditionalist populism to the race, running on a slogan of "the power of the people" and targeting those that have felt left behind in Costa Rica's trend toward modernization and economic development over the last decade. Araya also appealed to those who, at some level, weren't ready to vote for a woman for president. Araya's biggest appeal, however, might have been that of an alternative to the PLN's "Arias faction", of which Chinchilla was considered a member.

14. (C) Despite high approval ratings, there is a small core of voters who strongly dislike President Arias and his brother Rodrigo Arias, considering them oligarchs who "rigged" the 2003 constitutional amendment process which permitted Arias to run again; the 2006 national elections; and even the 2007 CAFTA referendum, to pursue their own agenda. Araya presented himself as an alternative to Arias's hand picked successor, Chinchilla, who had publicly stated that she would continue the policies of the Arias administration if elected. Some experts we spoke with immediately before the June 7 primary, including pollsters from CID-Gallup, believed that these factors, along with a well organized voter-mobilization push, might spur Araya to victory.

15. (C) However, Chinchilla pushed through to a surprisingly comfortable victory, winning the popular vote by thirteen percent (55 percent to Araya's 42 percent, with former Minister of Public Security Fernando Berrocal winning the remaining 3 percent). We believe that her victory came about due to two major wells of support--women voters and those seeking continuity of the Arias period--as well as a bit of old-fashioned mud-slinging. As the country's first female Vice-President, and the first female with a legitimate chance of becoming president, Chinchilla used a backbone of female

supporters to power her campaign and present herself as a "new" political player--despite years on the political scene.

16. (C) Additionally, by tying herself closely to the Arias government, Chinchilla was able to take a share of credit for the successes of the administration, and benefited from the Arias political machine's ability to mobilize supporters and resources. Chinchilla also was very successful through surrogates, at hitting at Araya for alleged corruption

(including linking him to disgraced former-president and current PUSC candidate Calderon) without it being linked directly to her campaign. The end result was a smashing victory that confounded doubters and firmly positioned her as the front-runner in the general election.

PAC'S "CLOSED PRIMARY" DELIVERS SOLIS

17. (C) Despite challenges by two younger, fresher faces in the party (politician/economist Epsy Campbell and businessman Roman Macaya), quasi-populist PAC founder Otton Solis easily won PAC's "closed" primary on May 31. Solis, who is running for president for the third time in a row, will be Chinchilla's major competition in the general election. While Chinchilla presents voters with an option for a continuation of the moderate, pro-trade policies of the Arias administration, Solis promotes a left-of-center, protectionist agenda which was highlighted by his vocal opposition to the CAFTA-DR agreement. Solis still maintains that he would attempt to renegotiate the trade agreement if he were elected president.

18. (C) In contrast to the PLN's open primary, PAC required that all would-be voters register with the party to be eligible to vote in the primary. Perhaps showing the waning popularity of the party, just over twenty-two thousand voters participated in the primary, despite sixty-seven thousand actually registering to vote. PAC's turnout came in stark contrast to the more than five-hundred thousand Costa Ricans who took part in the PLN primary and meant that the PLN's third place finisher, Berrocal with, three percent of the vote, won almost as many votes as Solis.

9 (C) If Solis hopes to have a chance at victory in 2010, he now needs to unite not just his own party, but also put together a wider "opposition coalition" to support him. While there have been signs that he might be able to bring together other leftist parties, he still faces a challenge in creating excitement for his (third) presidential campaign and finding a way to appeal to voters at a time when PAC appears to be losing steam. Additionally, Solis is sometimes his campaign's own worst enemy, with frugal/austere political spending policies, a traditional skepticism of modern campaign styles (he eschews public opinion polls and new media) and a dislike for fundraising, which he views as damaging to the clean and ethical image he seeks to project.

THE ONCE AND FUTURE PRESIDENT? NOT LIKELY

10. (C) The conservative Partido Union Social Cristiana (PUSC), the final major piece in the Costa Rican political scene, is a party in disarray. While the party was in power only four short years ago, today some Embassy contacts question whether it will survive past the next elections. Deepening its crisis, PUSC party leaders (now down to mostly calderonistas) selected former-President Rafael Angel Calderon to be its presidential candidate at its June 26th national convention. Calderon is currently on trial for corruption (charges widely believed to be true), and faces possible imprisonment if convicted. According to polls, over 70 percent of Costa Ricans hold an unfavorable view of him, though most analysts concede that he could possibly win up to

15 percent of the popular vote in 2010--if he's not a convicted felon before then.

MUCH STILL UP IN THE AIR

¶11. (C) While Chinchilla is widely considered to be the front-runner, the actual elections are nearly seven months away--plenty of time for mistakes to be made. Chinchilla will have to work to unite her own party behind her, and has already gone a long way in reconciling with Araya and his supporters. Under an agreement the two former adversaries have reached, a number of Araya supporters will be included among PLN's National Assembly candidate list. However, Araya recently put speculation that himself would run for a seat to rest, stating that his possibly candidacy stood in the way of any reconciliation agreement with Chinchilla. Chinchilla and Araya have both publicly hinted at a possible ministerial

post for Araya in a Chinchilla administration.

¶12. (C) Solis will probably try and unite a number of small leftist parties behind his candidacy and work to develop a focus and effective message for his campaign. Calderon, though unlikely to prevail, will probably focus on trying to win his court battle and then reviving his moribund party. In doing so, his goal will likely be to make a decent showing in the presidential elections, but more importantly pick up some National Assembly seats for his key supporters (his wife, Gloria Bejarano heads the list of PUSC National Assembly candidates). Finally, all the candidates will choose their first and second vice-presidential running mates, and work on formalizing their party's candidate lists for Congressional seats. In short, though Chinchilla begins the general campaign with an advantage, much could change over the next seven months.

COMMENT: BETWEEN THE FUTURE AND THE PAST

¶13. (C) Barring some unforeseen occurrence, the election should come down to a basic choice between Chinchilla and Solis, with the former looking ahead to "the future" and the latter gazing back towards "the past". In the race itself, Chinchilla has a distinct organizational and financial advantage. Her team has already been through a serious primary challenge, which forced her to hone her message and her tactics. Her campaign relies on a host of modern polling and tracking data, makes use of robo-calls, hosts sophisticated real-time on-line chats with supporters and has a solid fundraising machine. If Chinchilla does go on to the win, she would not only be the first female to hold the office, but also a welcome continuation of the Arias administration's U.S.-compatible policies. Her election would provide needed continuity on a number of important policy fronts, from international trade and infrastructure development to public security and environmental protection. This would provide the USG it's best opportunity to continue pursuing our foreign policy goals in relation to Costa Rica, and see Costa Rica continue its role as a close U.S. ally in Central America.

¶14. (C) Solis's path to the presidency relies in part on external factors. His best chance of victory entails a criminal conviction for Calderon, which would leave Solis as the only viable alternative to the PLN and Chinchilla (describing the situation, one analyst we spoke with said a free Calderon is "the best friend the PLN has"). In this scenario, Solis might be able to siphon off votes from the hard-core PUSC loyalists, who would never vote for a PLN candidate. Solis is also counting on appealing to the "anti" vote--made up of traditionalist Ticos resistant to change and skeptical about the transformations the country has gone through over the last 8-10 years. Support from these sectors combined with support from PAC and other smaller parties might possibly be enough to push Solis over the top in

February--or it might not. While Solis came close to winning the last election in 2006 (losing by only one percent to Arias), he and his message have become a bit stale, especially in comparison to the "fresh" and "new" Chinchilla.

Solis' campaign, in comparison, is also fairly rudimentary--his campaign manager recently told us that he "thought he had convinced Solis to do some polling before the election this time", providing a stark contrast to the Chinchilla campaigns mountains of data.

¶15. (C) If Solis were to somehow win, large question marks exist over how he would actually govern. Taken at his word, Solis would attempt to renegotiate or even repeal CAFTA-DR, which might scuttle the agreement in its entirety. But questions also abound as to what he would do in other sectors, including his stated distrust of international investment and what focus, if any, he would put on addressing Costa Rica's deteriorating security situation. Regardless, a Solis-led government would be less predictable and less reliable in support of U.S. interests, and might again detour Costa Rica from its path towards socio-economic development.

END COMMENT.

ELECTIONS TIME-TABLE

¶16. (SBU) The following are the next key milestones for the 2010 elections:

- 8/7/2009 - Deadline for public officials to resign their posts to run for a seat in the National Assembly (Embassy sources report that Minister of Finance Guillermo Zuniga and Minister of Justice Viviana Martin are among those government officials planning to resign and run for National Assembly seats)
- 10/1/2009 - General election campaigns legally begin
- 10/23/2009 - Deadline for registration of presidential candidates
- 12/16/2009 - Start of two-week "Christmas Truce" in campaigning
- 1/7/2010 - Civil Registry finalizes the voter rolls
- 2/4/2010 - Final day of official political campaigning
- 2/6/2010 - Start of three-day prohibition on alcohol sales
- 2/7/2010 - Election Day
- 4/4/2010 - Second round of Presidential voting (only necessary if no candidate wins more than 40 percent of the vote)
- 5/1/2010 - First session of new Legislative Assembly begins
- 5/8/2010 - Inauguration of new President

BRENNAN